



Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian realist pendulum

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Abstract

Reinhold Niebuhr is widely acknowledged as the father of Christian realism and a staunch critic of pacifism. In a famous exchange with his brother H. Richard in *The Christian Century*, Niebuhr defended the necessity of entering the fray of battle to combat evil as opposed to opting for non-violent detachment that ultimately usurps God's authority to decide on final matters. Niebuhr, however, never endorsed an aggressive Just War doctrine. Striving to reconcile the Christian command of love with the harsh realities of power resulting from universal sinfulness, Niebuhr emphasised the necessity of negotiating the distance between the two extremes of a pendulum swinging from Christian pacifism to the endorsement of interventionist policies. Rather than this being an expression of the ambiguity of his moral convictions, this paper argues that it is a product of his sensitivity to applying contextual moral and political judgement as an exercise of theological responsibility.

Keywords

Butterfield, Christian realism, Elshtain, Niebuhr, pacifism, Wight

Introduction

Reinhold Niebuhr is widely acknowledged as the father of Christian realism and an uncompromising critic of political pacifism. In a famous exchange with his brother H. Richard in the pages of *The Christian Century* over the issue of the U.S. response to the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria, Niebuhr (2012) castigated the pacifist's detachment from the affairs of the world as an expression of moral indifference and self-righteous purism, the kind that ultimately usurps God's authority to decide on ultimate matters. The fact, however, that Niebuhr himself harboured pacifist sentiments up until the late '20s, and that he continued to revere at least vocational pacifism for its spirit of self-abnegation and self-sacrifice, rather complicates Christian realism's relationship

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with pacifism. Striving to reconcile the Christian command of love with the harsh realities of power resulting from universal sinfulness, Christian realists appeared to oscillate ambiguously between the two extremes of a pendulum swinging from Christian pacifism (as in the case of early Martin Wight) to the endorsement of muscular interventionism (as in the case of Jean Bethke-Elshtain's defence of the 'War On Terror'). Niebuhr's own ambivalence on the matter was not a result of the ambiguity of his moral convictions, as is often assumed, but rather a product of his sensitivity to applying contextual moral and political judgement as an exercise of theological responsibility. This paper will argue that while this ambivalence has been a source of frustration for both sympathisers and critics of Niebuhr's Christian realism, it should primarily be recognised as an asset that accounts for its continued strength, relevance, and revamped popularity.

The Christian realist pendulum

It could be argued that the moniker 'Christian realism' is an oxymoron or, to use Niebuhr's favourite expression, a paradox. It is not only that the Christian faith or, rather more accurately, Jesus' teachings are often – yet not incontestably – identified with the perfectionist ethics of non-violence. It is also that early Christianity emerged as a transformative revolutionary movement bent on radically changing the relationship between the self and the world by calling for a transition from a self-centred preoccupation with the pursuit of individual interest and power accumulation to a new *way of life* embodying and instantiating the ethics of love and self-sacrifice. Realism, on the other hand, is traditionally understood as the doctrine of compromise and pragmatic accommodation with the realities of power, the acceptance of the world as it is, that is, a realm of competition for survival and dominance between rapacious or, in the Hobbesian version, between equally vulnerable and insecure human beings. For realism, the world is not amenable to salvation or perfection, but rather constitutes an environment governed by contingency and the tragic conflict of competing interests. How, then, is it ever possible to put these two *wor(l)ds* together, 'Christian(ity)' and 'realism', in any meaningful way?

And yet, this paradox was embraced by a group of academics, theologians, laymen, and policy-makers, known as 'Christian realists', that were pivotal in 20th-century American foreign policy circles and public life over a period of about 30 years (roughly from the mid-30s to the mid-60s) with Reinhold Niebuhr as their leading spokesperson (see Epp, 2003).¹ For those publicly engaged intellectuals, the crucial question was, how can one defend a normative position in contemporary democratic politics that is rooted in the Christian tradition while at the same time being pragmatic or 'realistic' about the constraints of the existing political and social order. The standard misconception among those on the theological side who were quick to call out Niebuhrian realism for colluding with the forces of a largely secular and atheistic world steeped in violence and governed by the logic of power politics, is that Niebuhr conceded too much to worldly values to the point of coming off as less than Christian (Hauerwas, 2013; Milbank, 1997). However, Christian realists were always adamant that their 'realism' had nothing to do with a neo-pagan resignation to the tragedy or 'necessary evil' of worldly existence. On the contrary, it rather issued from their adherence to the Biblical account of the human condition as fallen, yet redeemable. In their understanding of human beings as both sinners and

perfectible they were faithful to a long-standing Protestant tradition that harks back to Luther's *simul justus simul peccatus*, but really finds its first systematic expression in the theological anthropology and theology of history of the Latin father of the Church, St Augustine.

Indeed, Epp (1991) has famously described the rise of the mid-20th century Christian realism as the 'Augustinian moment' in international politics. Under that rubric, Epp registers the overwhelming influence of Augustinian theology on Christian realism's theological anthropology and theology of history (eschatology). Christian realists saw 'man' as exceptionally gifted, created in God's image (*imago Dei*), yet inevitably tainted by sin sharing in the consequences of Adam's primordial act of disobedience that corrupted human nature (original sin).² Their realism implied that they took the Fall and its effects (the proliferation of evil in the world and the presence of the demonic in history) seriously (see Gilkey, 2001; Lovin, 1995).

However, the other part of the equation was their emphasis on the role of God's providence in history and their faith that all things have 'a final share in the redemptive purpose of Christ' (Butterfield in Thorp, 2003: 83). In fact, their faith in the redemptive capacities of love and the political importance of hope in international politics is a neglected part of their legacy insofar as both critics and sympathisers alike tend to focus on their pessimistic account of human nature and their emphasis on sin and evil.³ In contrast, this paper argues that the Christian realist legacy is likely to be widely misunderstood unless it is appreciated as inviting a constant negotiation between the self-incurred reality of humankind's sinful existence and the redemptive potential of the law of love (*caritas*), not only to tame human beings' destructive capacity through institutions of justice, but also to improve the ethical and material coordinates of their worldly existence. Admittedly, this latter part of the Christian realist legacy has never been sufficiently highlighted, despite that, for example, Niebuhr's (1943) second volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, or his *Faith and History* (Niebuhr, 1949) as well as Butterfield's (1949) *Christianity and History*, devote a significant part of their arguments to differentiating genuine Christian hope (and, therefore, the significance of Christian virtues for reforming public morals) from unrealistic and dangerous utopian aspirations (Markham, 2010).

This paper argues that Niebuhr's frequent allusions to the tension between individual responsibility for sin and the containment of evil, on the one hand, and the fruits of the law of love, repentance and forgiveness, on the other, is the key to understanding the politics of Christian realism. It represents the movement of a pendulum that oscillates *between* the ultimate moral ideas issuing from a perfectionist interpretation of Christian ethics – the extreme expression of which is Christian pacifism – *and* the constraints of any existing, imperfect social and political order, perennially destined to fall short of the ideals of Christ's eternal kingdom and potentially necessitating the use of force for its preservation. Employed in this paper merely as an analytical device, since it was obviously not a concept directly evoked by Niebuhr or other Christian realists, the idea of the pendulum offers the significant advantage of providing a useful instrument to assess the accusation that Niebuhr's effort to remain equidistant between the critique of cynicism and that of moralism invited an indefensible moral ambiguity in his work. On the contrary, Niebuhr's stance was dictated by strictly theological and pastoral motivations. The

gravitational pull driving him away from pacifism was animated by his critique of self-righteousness (based on the Augustinian admonition against the relentless capacity of vice to disguise as virtue), while the opposite pull away from aggressive interventionism was fuelled by his Augustinian suspicion against unchecked power and the absolutisation of worldly things or values which, in theological parlance, is a species of the, fundamental in Judeo-Christian religiosity, critique of idolatry.

Still, the nature of the gap between the real and the ideal which seems to make the pendulum swing is not necessarily as self-evident or straightforward as it may seem. The workings of the pendulum rather depend on how one interprets its two opposing tipping points and the nature of the tension between them. Is it the ideal as moral life vs. the real as the reality of evil? Is it, perhaps, finite worldly existence vs. eternal life? Or is it, rather, sin/evil and its concomitant politics of mastery and domination (Augustine's *civitas terrena*) vs. an alternative eschatological existence that experiences worldly life as a pilgrimage and looks to the eternal for its fulfilment (Augustine's *civitas Dei*)?

I would argue that the logic of Niebuhr's Christian realist pendulum is governed by the Pauline injunction that Christians be *in* but not *of* this world as also expressed in the Augustinian tension between the earthly and the heavenly city. The created 'world' is a gift from God and therefore needs to be engaged and preserved, the absolute display of divine pedagogy being God's active care for the world manifested in the Incarnation (so *in* this world). But the 'world' is also the domain of Satan's reign (the Prince of this world) made possible by the interaction of fallen human beings whose sinful actions must be resisted, including the exceptionalist pretensions of any nation or political regime to represent absolute virtue (so not *of* this world). This complex predicament (at once celebrating human freedom and responsibility *and* condemning its evil or sinful tendencies) explains the weight Niebuhr's Christian realism placed on the value of judgement and the theological virtue of discernment (*diakrisis*), or to be more precise, on the necessity of making distinctions in this life between lesser and greater evils as opposed to falling into either moral indifference, complacency and social conformism (*acedia*) or historical immanentism (man-made utopias as the realisation of the Kingdom of God on earth).

And yet, the doctrine's tensive ambivalence and emphasis on the necessity of judgement is the reason behind both its fecundity and the frustration its application generates. For it inevitably leaves it open to varied appropriations, as well as abuse, not only by a diverse range of actors across the political spectrum.⁴ Holding fast to both contradictory impulses or imperatives that the pendulum generates has proven a daunting task, inherently unstable and prone to failure, even for Niebuhr himself. To show what is at stake in this balancing act, I will first outline the contours of Niebuhr's treatment of the tension generated by the pendulum's movement. I will then turn to those Christian realists influenced by Niebuhr that were pulled closer to the pendulum's antithetical tipping points to illustrate the tendencies that fuel its gravitational pull and threaten its precarious balance. To this end, I will compare two of Niebuhr's admirers on the European side of North Atlantic that shared his prophetic critique of liberal bourgeois culture, Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, against an American political philosopher, Jean Bethke-Elshtain, who stressed the flip side of Niebuhr's prophetism, his emphasis on civic responsibility. Such a comparison will elucidate the importance Niebuhr placed on the duty of judgement and the promises and limitations that surround its application in international politics.

'In the battle and above it': Niebuhr's oscillation

If one searches for the perfect expression of the Christian realist pendulum, one needs to look no further than to the towering figure of the movement itself. America's 20th-century foremost Protestant theologian and public intellectual, Niebuhr built his entire synthesis of an engaged Christian ethics with an active commitment to social and political affairs on the ever-present tension between normative concerns and power politics, the hallmark of realist ethics. Niebuhr's political theology⁵ encompasses the internal contradictions of Christian realist thought which are, simultaneously, the source of its constant vitality. George Kennan may be known for calling Niebuhr 'the father of us all' when referring to 20th-century realists (Thompson, 2009: 139), but a more apt characterisation would be Elie's (2007) 'A Man for All Seasons'. The broad range of positions that Niebuhr adopted in his long intellectual career testifies not only to the breadth and vibrancy of his thought, but also to the flexible nature of Christian realism itself, which is more of an ethos of principled engagement with the contingencies of political life rather than a fixed doctrine or a coherent political programme. Ultimately, Niebuhr's 'courage to change' when circumstances dictated it was not a sign of lack of conviction on his part but, on the contrary, the expression of his commitment to the Christian practice of discernment (*diakrisis*) as an exercise of theological and civic responsibility.

Patterson (2003) reminds us that Niebuhr harboured a qualified respect for pacifism for its witness to the ideal of the law of love to such an extent that he opposed Roosevelt's rearmament policy up until 1940 (p. 14). Niebuhr, of course, differentiated between vocational and political pacifism. He respected vocational pacifists (Quakers, Mennonites, Brethren) for their spirit of self-sacrifice, but he considered political pacifism dangerous for its refusal to make moral distinctions and political judgements that would differentiate, for instance, between the British Empire and the Third Reich. Such moral relativism was for Niebuhr naïve and irresponsible as it confused neutrality with resignation. The individual who best personified this 'otherworldly' attitude, for Niebuhr, was perhaps the greatest Protestant theologian of the 20th-century, Karl Barth. Niebuhr had a strained personal relationship with Barth and strong reservations against the quietist implications he discerned in his theology (see Erwin, 2013: 42–43, 70). Niebuhr's (1928) critical engagement with Barth's work dates to a critical review he wrote in 1928 on 'Barth as an Apostle of the Absolute' in the pages of *The Christian Century*. Niebuhr's main criticism was that Barth's dialectical theology, with its emphasis on the distance between 'Man and God' and on 'man's' inexorable sinfulness, was too otherworldly in its neutralism, too detached from social and political affairs, and for that reason verging on self-righteousness in its refusal to make immediate judgments about greater goods and lesser evils in this world.

It is telling that the two men never saw eye to eye. When Niebuhr was advocating the entry of the U.S. in World War II, Barth was dismissing both sides of the conflict as equally ungodly. When later during the war, in an act of total reversal, Barth identified the Allied cause with an act of resistance 'unequivocally in the name of Jesus Christ' (Barth, 1941: 7), Niebuhr disapproved of such a prophetic rhetoric that seemed to grant flawed human beings immediate access to God's ultimate judgement. Finally, during the Cold War, when Barth reverted to keeping an equal distance between the two

superpowers, Niebuhr again argued for the necessity of taking sides and resisting Soviet totalitarianism. The real bone of contention, of course, had always been how one strikes the right balance between the demands of faith and the Christian virtue of humility in one's conduct of human affairs, on the one hand, and the necessity of taking power seriously and preventing worldly evils, such as totalitarian regimes of terror, from enjoying a free rein, on the other. If, before World War II, Niebuhr derided Barth for advocating a politically debilitating theology, he was now alarmed by Barth's unruly oscillation between political inaction and the unqualified sanctification of a political cause, an ambivalence he deemed as symptomatic of Barth's theological apocalypticism. Niebuhr (1942) (p. 3), see also Erwin (2013), instead, echoing the Pauline/Johannite injunction that Christians be *in* but not *of* this world, urged responsible Christians to be 'in the battle and above it' (p. 73), committed to a just cause but with no malice for their adversaries and in recognition of their common sinfulness:

To be in the battle means to defend a cause against its peril, to protect a nation against its enemies, to strive for truth against error, to defend justice against injustice. To be above the battle means that we understand how imperfect the cause is which we defend, that we contritely acknowledge the sins of our own nations, that we recognize the common humanity which binds us to even the most terrible foes, and that we know also of our common need for grace and forgiveness.

Similarly, Niebuhr's post-war hard-line, anti-Soviet rhetoric did not endorse a crude anti-Communism or mindless patriotism, but rather reflected his familiar pattern of combining moral and political resolve with a healthy measure of self-restraint. In *The Irony of American History* (1952), his most comprehensive statement on America's Cold War responsibility, Niebuhr (2008) cautioned that even in the best of circumstances 'power cannot be wielded without guilt,' since 'we cannot do good without also doing evil (p. 37, 42).' Thus, he worried, 'either we will seek escape from responsibilities which involve unavoidable guilt, or we will be plunged into avoidable guilt by too great confidence in our virtue.' Nevertheless, Niebuhr also insisted that defensive actions were required, despite all hazards. Along with George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau, Niebuhr became one of the key intellectual champions of America's containment strategy against the Soviet Union, including the maintenance of a nuclear deterrent.⁶ Their version of containment, however, was far from an unqualified defence of American foreign policy and its adventurous interventionism, as manifested in Niebuhr's subsequent reluctance to approve of specific interventions (as in the Dominican Republic in 1965), and by his criticisms of the Vietnam war, which encompassed a wider indictment of American foreign policy and culture.

Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight: Wrestling with pacifism

Niebuhr's wrestling with, and qualified opposition to, pacifism was not then a product of fatalist surrender to a culture of violence but an exercise of Christian discernment in an environment compromised by sin. Niebuhr was not prepared to side unequivocally with

faith or Christ as opposed to culture or civilization, to recall his brother's famous *Christ and Culture* book (Niebuhr, 1951), not because he was not Christian enough, but rather because he perceived it as his theological and pastoral duty to work 'by love in the world of culture' (emphasis added) (Niebuhr, 1951: 179). Such an attitude that often involves readiness to embrace the messiness of the world of culture is not always easy to square with the confessional sentiment that requires of a Christian to 'hold to Christ and for the rest be totally uncommitted' or return to 'Cavalry and the Catacombs', to recall two famous phrases, employed by Butterfield (1949) (p. 146) and Martin Wight (in Hall, 2006: 6) respectively, in the context of their own struggle with the dialectics of faith and culture. In their case, the Christian realist pendulum often gravitated towards a more detached or purist approach to the affairs of the world that, sometimes, assumed counter-cultural or apocalyptic dimensions.

Herbert Butterfield was a diplomatic historian by trade who also had an abiding interest in historiography and international affairs, known for chairing the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics.⁷ As a historian, Butterfield (1931) was critical of the 'Whig interpretation of history', a progressivist take on the philosophy of history that transformed the historian into the moral censor of her time. For Butterfield (1949), instead, history did not award moral credentials, but rather uncovered 'man's' universal sinfulness (p. 45). Human beings are never entirely demonic or angelic, but always relatively virtuous or vicious operating within an entangled environment he called 'the predicament of Hobbesian fear' (Butterfield, 1949: 89). Even reasonably virtuous human beings may find themselves forced to confront each other with mutual suspicion and fear regarding each other's intentions. Coined at about the same time by John Herz as the 'security dilemma', it was described by Butterfield (1949) (p. 157); (1950) (p. 152), who preferred an Augustinian metaphor, as a 'terrible knot', 'a structural notion in which the self-help attempts of states to look after their security needs tend, regardless of intention, to lead to rising insecurity for others as each interprets its own measures as defensive and measures of others as potentially threatening'. For Butterfield, this predicament provided the 'basic pattern for all narratives of human conflict'. A non-conformist Methodist with a strong footing in Augustinian pessimism, Butterfield shared with the Christian realists the conviction that 'the race in armaments and the war itself are explained in the last resort, therefore, as the result of man's universal sin' (Butterfield, 1957: 22).

When it came to containing the effects of sin, however, Butterfield was, in general, in favour of always erring on the side of caution. He was certainly in favour of defending the weak against the strong or of the limited use of force either in self-defence or to prevent a greater evil, but his preferred template of moral action in history was not the Just War tradition, but rather the Biblical image of the 'suffering servant': 'the strongest thing Christians can do is just to testify; bearing witness faithfully and leaving Providence to do the rest' (Butterfield in Hall, 2002: 60). Non-violent action or bearing testimony to the law of love could potentially undermine the logic of political and military antagonism and act as a 'game-changer'. Just as the early Christian martyrs shook the conscience of an Empire and changed the course of history, so, Butterfield believed, a similar Christian politics of bearing testimony is not only possible but necessary:

And in the worst crisis, if renewed war breeds more war, and civilization disappears in a thousand local conflicts, a state of misery could conceivably be reached in which protest and the voluntary suffering of the pacifist might be the only lantern for the rediscovery of the things which we call human values. (Butterfield, 1963: 11).

Butterfield was not a political pacifist and was adamant in his opposition to Nazi evil in World War II. However, he also refused to demonise his German opponents or underestimate Russia's resurgence after the war simply to bow to the diplomatic niceties of the common struggle. In that, he remained a contrarian all his life with a remarkable ability to swing the Christian realist pendulum to a direction critical of the powers that be or of the comfortable certainties and self-delusions of his time. A strong example of the latter is his stance on the question of the superpowers' nuclear competition during the Cold War. Butterfield considered nuclear weapons the 'second fall of Adam' condemning the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan and warning that the use of nuclear weapons threatened civilisation itself rendering the Just War logic of using force to rectify wrongs obsolete.

Butterfield went even further questioning the deterrence capacity of nuclear weapons. In a 1962 pamphlet he published in support of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), he argued for the unilateral abolition of the hydrogen bomb. Although he later disavowed the political tactics of the CND, the logic of his argument remained faithful to the confessional Christian attitude of bearing witness:

Perhaps it would be a beautiful thing if a country which had the power to abjure the nuclear weapon would have all the risks and undertake that policy for the sake of improvement this might produce in the world situation, a recovery of confidence. . .

. . . I always thought that an avowed renunciation of the nuclear weapons might perhaps [allow] a chance to do good – just as being a great gesture of faith (Butterfield in Thorp, 2003: 96).

Butterfield, the ever-suspicious Christian realist, was perhaps here verging on old-fashioned moralism. Convinced that the 'dominion of fear' imposed by nuclear weapons is unviable, his argument implied that a calculated risk for the benefit of mankind did not anymore sound sentimental but pragmatic. Even if Butterfield quickly came to realise that such an argument pushes the limits of pragmatism, to say the least, the attraction of a stance that Niebuhr would probably classify as an example of Christian purism is unmistakable.

Martin Wight,⁸ a friend of Butterfield's and a fellow member of the British Committee, demonstrated a similar proclivity to swing the Christian realist pendulum towards pacifism. Perhaps the best place to begin evaluating Wight's pacifism is his 1936 essay, 'Christian Pacifism'. One should not overestimate the significance of this youthful essay that Wight in later days used to leave out of his CV (Gabriel Wight in Young, 2003: 105). Yet, one should also not underestimate that Wight was struggling all his life to accommodate his pacifist sentiments and that even when he moved closer to a Christian realist sensibility and an appreciation of the moral codes and institutional conventions that make up international society (Wight, 1966), his diagnosis of the fate of modern

civilisation preserved a strong ‘otherworldly’ element in his thought that indicted secular culture. His theological critique of modernity as the embodiment of the sin of *apostasy* (turning away from God) having emancipated power from moral constraints, allowing power politics to dominate and bringing about the ‘judgements’ of war and revolution, was only the corollary of his early theological anthropology, distinctly Augustinian as well as influenced by Barthian neo-orthodoxy:

The picture of human history. . . is of mankind, not marching steadily up out of the shadow into broad sunshine but always going on through the murk and obscurity produced by man’s misuse of his moral freedom (Wight, 1949: 4).

His flirtation with pacifism, then, is crucially conditioned by his diagnosis of modern politics. For Wight, in contrast to other forms of pacifism, Christian pacifism does not condemn all use of force. It rather differentiates between sinful violence and consecrated violence. Consecrated violence is violence against the causes of war, such as economic inequality and social injustices, inspired by the biblical example of Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple from the merchants. The last resort of resistance remains self-sacrifice as Jesus’ ethics forbids the taking of human life (Wight, 1936: 15). The early Wight was convinced that acting upon the law of love was the most effective way to face evil in the world: ‘The only method that can finally overcome the irrational and demonic forces of evil that have their fullest expression in Nazi Germany, is that of Cavalry and the catacombs.’ (Wight in Bull, 1977: 4).⁹

It is not entirely clear to what extent Wight later qualified his pacifism. Indeed, it has been a source of confusion and frustration for some scholars trying to reconcile the pacifist and the realist Wight (Nicholson, 1981: 18). However, Wight gradually came to recognise, as Niebuhr did before him, that the perfectionist ethics of the Sermon on the Mount were at odds with the realities of international politics (Thomas, 2001: 920–929). The publications of *Power Politics* (1946) and ‘The Church, Russia and the West’ (1948), demonstrate this shift in Wight’s emphasis. In *Power Politics* Wight draws attention to the centrality of power in international relations, in which a situation of potential enmity between states renders war inevitable (Wight 1995: 102): ‘Powers will continue to seek security without reference to justice and to pursue their vital interests irrespective of common interests’ (Wight, 1995: 68). And yet, Wight may, like Niebuhr, have recognised the necessity of taming the use of unbridled power in international relations through the exercise of moral responsibility, but he never felt comfortable with endorsing an aggressive Just War doctrine. He did acknowledge that the changed political and technological circumstances of the nuclear age had transformed the parameters of international politics, but he read this development through apocalyptic lenses: a process in which, through war, powers decrease in number and increase in size until the final day of judgement (Wight, 1948: 30). In a letter to IMC’s J. H. Oldham, he wrote:

Are these appalling judgements of war and atomic energy which hang over us an expression of the fact that for these years past we have been faced once more with the problem of antichrist in history, and we have been blind to it? (Wight in Thomas, 2001: 919).

His prescription was the Pauline stance of ‘watchful anticipation’. The imminence of the apocalypse did not lead Wight to endorse either political quietism or political messianism. Rather, marrying realism with theology he proposed the traditional Christian vision of eschatological hope: ‘ruthlessly realistic analysis is not incompatible with hope, for hope is a theological, not a political virtue’ (Wight, 1948: 8). As a realist, he demolished all dreams of human self-sufficiency (‘anthropocentric hopes’). As a Christian, he believed in hope as a theological virtue (‘the object of Hope is God’). In the arena of international politics, hope or trust in human endeavours can be dangerous or futile; however, faith in the divine and the hope of redemption provides meaning to what would otherwise appear as a meaningless succession of disastrous events.

Jean Bethke-Elstain: Stretching Niebuhrianism to its limits

Jean Bethke-Elstain was one of the most important political theorists of the 20th century. Her work was steeped in Augustinian political theology while she had openly proclaimed her sympathy for Christian realism and the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, in particular (Elstain, 2010). In this section, I will focus on her defence of the U.S. invasion in Afghanistan and the ‘War on Terror’ to assess an arguable application of Niebuhrianism that pushed the Christian realist pendulum towards the interventionist side of the spectrum. Post 9/11, Elstain relied on Niebuhrian insights and Just War thinking to argue for the necessity of applying force to rectify wrongs done and punish the regime behind the perpetrators of the attack. In so doing, she was confronted with the dilemmas arising from the Augustinian tension, a central Niebuhrian concern too, between the moral imperative of the law of love and the responsibility to resist the proliferation of evil in the world.

In her early work on Augustine, Elstain wrote that the bishop of Hippo offered a ‘*via negativa* above all’, an understanding of God as an absolute judgement on our limited earthly perspectives and ambitions, even those which have the noblest intentions: ‘earthly *potestas* is tied to the temptation inherent to that form of power we call dominion’, and continued, ‘clearly Augustine would have a thing or two to say to those folks who equate America with a sacral order. This is not ‘God’s country’, Augustine would surely say, but, yet another nation ‘under God’s judgement’ (Elstain, 1996: 95). Indeed, in her pre-9/11 article, ‘Just War and Humanitarian Intervention’, Elstain insisted that the Augustinian realist is ‘called to act in a mode of realistic hope with a hard-headed recognition of the limits of action’, thereby issuing a cautionary note against the hubris of interventionist overreach (Elstain, 2001: 23). Her Augustinianism acknowledged that the temptation to dominate can express itself in perverse ways: ‘the desire to be *at peace* is too often a desire to *impose one’s will* to subject others. This leads to pridefulness, a ‘perverted imitation of God’. And pridefulness spurs more temptation to vanquish’ (Elstain, 1996: 109).

It is all too surprising, then, that Elstain (2003) changed her tune when in her controversial, *Just War Against Terror*, she seemed to overlook or gloss over Augustine’s reservations against the pretensions of piety or self-righteous vigilantism. To be fair, in the

book Elshtain preferred to focus on another pronounced Augustinian theme, the necessity of civic peace, even if imperfect, a theme that Niebuhr would prioritise too. Yet, she went a step further than both Augustine and Niebuhr when she relied on Hannah Arendt's valorisation of the civic community as the space for freedom and self-realisation, a step that Augustine (perhaps less so Niebuhr) would probably be reluctant to take as it may have involved ascribing an independent, non-eschatological value to an earthly institution. 'Without civic peace', Elshtain writes, 'human life descends to its most primitive level', highlighting Somalia and Afghanistan as examples of the disorder that descends 'when government becomes destructive of the most basic end for which it is instituted – *tranquillitas ordinis*' (Elshtain, 2003: 67–68). Engaging explicitly with the Niebuhrian notion of responsibility, Elshtain adds that 'when a wound as grievous as that of September 11 has been inflicted on a body politic, it would be the height of irresponsibility [. . .] to fail to respond' (Elshtain, 2003: 59). Yet, she (Elshtain, 2003: 151) takes it up a notch to a direction that Niebuhr would probably find lacking in humility by arguing that the 'shock waves that rippled around the globe in the wake of 9/11' acted as a reminder that the expectation of 'American power, stability and continuity is a basic feature of international order'. Perhaps capturing some of Niebuhr's Cold War moods but none of his doubts, Elshtain did not shy away from comparing U.S. hegemony with *Pax Romana*, ultimately arguing that the collective *tranquillitas ordinis*, the international civic peace, 'vitality depends on America's ability to stay true to its own principles' (Elshtain, 2003: 6).

O'Driscoll (2007) has questioned this sentiment, calling attention to the exceptionalist convictions underlying Elshtain's assessment of U.S. power (p. 489). He notes that for Elshtain, 'America stands [. . .] as a beacon of virtue and moral leadership', rather than an imperfect political order, like any other, susceptible to bouts of self-righteousness under God's judgement. One is ironically reminded of Elshtain's earlier incredulity at those who would bestow on the United States the mantle of God's favour. Whereas both Augustine and Niebuhr would balk at such a presumption, Elshtain seems to embrace American hegemony somewhat unreflectively. In another trenchant critique of her book, Rengger (2004) draws attention to Augustine's admonitions against 'the allure of imperial grandiosity' reminding Elshtain that it was she who first emphasised Augustine's reticence to endorse euphemisms such as 'international civic peace' or 'peace and security' (a lexicon which in the Pauline tradition is, in fact, equated with the reign of the Antichrist) (p. 115). In an intriguing metaphor that shares in Elshtain's delight in using examples from popular culture, Rengger reminds her that in J. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* Gandalf resists the one ring lest he be tempted to abuse the immense power that it promises to its bearer: 'The way of the ring to my heart is through pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good . . . [but] over me the ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly' (Gandalf in Rengger, 2004: 115).

In contrasting Elshtain's work before and after 9/11, there are contradictions which suggest a shift away from her early Augustinianism and at least a partial appropriation of Niebuhr's complex dialectics of humility and responsibility. One can argue that while she is not Augustinian enough in her defence of the 'War on Terror', she remains inspired by the Augustinian tradition in her understanding of the obligation of *caritas* stressing that our ethical obligations extend to all humanity without exception because of our

shared origins in the *imago Dei*. Yet, in her defence of the burden of American power she seems eager to swing the Christian realist pendulum towards the uncomfortable direction of endorsing the ‘justness’ of a conflict that challenges both the limits of Just War thinking and the Christian realist distrust of centralised or unbridled power.

Niebuhr’s legacy: The duty of judgement

In his essay ‘The Problem of Generations’, Mannheim (1928) remarks that a generation consists of people of the same age who are confronted with the same historical challenges. Niebuhr and his fellow Christian realists belonged to a generation that faced the extreme conditions of the ‘short 20th century’ (Hobsbawm, 1995) and responded by employing the Christian concepts of sin, evil, hope, and love to make sense of their predicament. They did not offer a full-blown blueprint for political action, but rather were preoccupied with defining the terms of sound political judgement in a world riven by the consequences of human depravity and ‘man’s’ immense capacity for self-justification and self-love (*philautia*). Indeed, one of the main reasons why Niebuhr never warmed up to the Just War tradition was that when applied to the sinful world of power politics it could often be abused as a vehicle for justifying ideological crusades and imperial visions (see Coll, 2008).

Children of their time, Christian realists cherished pacifist sentiments at the beginning of their intellectual trajectory (Epp, 1991: 21). Niebuhr was an ‘avowed pacifist’ until the late-20s, Butterfield called himself ‘nearly a pacifist’ and Wight remained a conscientious objector throughout World War II (Patterson, 2003: 13, 14). World War II and the totalitarian menace forced them to reconsider their commitments and critique of modern culture. Suddenly, civilisation – despite it being the result of apostasy – seemed worth preserving, however imperfect. Niebuhr’s Marxist strictures against the decay and corruption of bourgeois culture receded after 1941. Butterfield (1960) emphasised the importance of moderation and painted the balance of power with providential colours (pp. 68–74). Wight too recognised the centrality of power and the moral responsibility attached to its use. To counter mankind’s destructive tendencies, he abandoned his early Barthian apocalypticism and advocated the norms, rules, and institutions of international society as civilisation’s bulwark to unmitigated anarchy (see Hall, 2006: 115). In fact, Niebuhr, Butterfield, and Wight could better be described as disillusioned pacifists, more concerned with human beings’ capacity to do greater harm by exalting themselves through sanctimonious indignation or smug piety than by any explicitly demonic ambition. It was human beings’ desire for good and virtue that could produce perverse outcomes, especially when amplified by a collective ambition to project power unchecked combined with the possession of immensely destructive military capabilities in a technologically advanced era.

That said, for Niebuhr the greatest danger was not erroneous action but inaction. For him, the fundamental source of immorality at the outset of the World War II was the evasion or denial of moral responsibility. The man of principle is not the one who remains aloof when the necessity of deciding between partial goods and lesser evils is imposed on him, but the one who knows he must find his way ‘in the maze of principles’. ‘The Christian faith ought to persuade us’, wrote Niebuhr (in Brown, 1986: 110), ‘that

political controversies are always conflicts between sinners and not between righteous men and sinners.' As a result, the task of moral politics is not to usurp God's role by seeking to prematurely enact Christ's Kingdom on earth, but to pursue proximate justice and apply immediate judgement defending peaceful co-existence, public order, and human liberty while mitigating the effects of excessive self-interest. Repentance, contrition, and forgiveness are not simply individual qualities to be applied in interpersonal relations, but political virtues that cultivate moderation, humility, and mutual understanding in international politics.

In calling for a cautious use of force to curb the spread of evil in the world, Niebuhrian Christian realism tried to negotiate the distance between pacifism and interventionism. While he attacked political or perfectionist pacifism, Niebuhr also resisted mainstream Just War thinking siding rather with the 'classics' of the Just War tradition that tended to emphasise the need for imposing moral constraints on the use of force rather than sanction its 'moral' application (McKeogh, 1997: 148; see also Moses in this volume).¹⁰ Such an attitude cannot be without mistakes or errors of judgement as Niebuhr's endorsements of the Allied carpet bombings of Hamburg and Dresden, and of the use of the atomic bomb on Japanese cities manifest (see Erwin, 2013: 84, 85). Elshtain's case is for that very reason symptomatic, interestingly stretching the logic of the Christian realist pendulum to a direction that challenges its animating ethos and perhaps exposes its ambiguities. While Niebuhr would have probably endorsed the U.S. response against the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, he would have hardly justified an all-out war against a secular regime that had not been involved in the attacks or condone the implementation of a large-scale project of democracy promotion in the Middle East. Elshtain's concern for the responsible use of American power is sufficiently Niebuhrian, but her embellishment of American exceptionalism would ring hollow in Niebuhr's ears.

The Niebuhrian path was always that of painstaking judgement applied with contrition, humility, and faith. The Christian realist ethos is summarised by Niebuhr's Lincolnian attitude of 'in the battle and above it', aptly reflecting his constant invitation to negotiate the tension between our responsibility to make distinctions between degrees of evil and good, and to act upon those distinctions, while at the same time recognising our common humanity, the universality (but not necessity) of sin, and the need for grace and forgiveness. Ultimately, Niebuhr's Christian realism stood in contrast to modern expressions of idolatry that either extol political quietism or enact dangerous political messianisms. As such, it embodied an ethos of public engagement that refused to surrender action to fanaticism, or cynicism, and faith to passivity.

In one of his best books, Niebuhr (1937) eloquently epitomises the Pauline origins of such an approach that refuses to surrender the final word to 'man's' tragic predicament (p. x):

. . . the Christian view of history passes through the sense of the tragic to a hope and an assurance which is 'beyond tragedy'. The cross, which stands at the center of the Christian worldview, reveals both the seriousness of human sin and the purpose and power of God to overcome it. Christianity's view of history is tragic in so far as it recognizes evil as an inevitable concomitant of even the highest spiritual enterprises. It is beyond tragedy in so far as it does not regard evil as inherent in existence itself, but as finally under the dominion of a good God.

Niebuhr's pendulum never ceased to enact the tensions of the Pauline injunction that Christians be *in* but not *of* this world and of the Augustinian dialectics of the terrestrial and the heavenly city, with all its ambiguities and hard dilemmas. Even in the depths of his affirmation of 'man's' sinful existence, Niebuhr never abandoned hope, not to an interventionist, puppeteer God but to a God whose judgement on history works through human achievements and failures, triumphs and catastrophes.

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Notes

1. Apart from Niebuhr, card-carrying members included John C. Bennet, Kenneth Thompson, Samuel McCrea Cavert, Henry P. Van Dusen, and Walter Marshall Horton (George Kennan, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and Hans Morgenthau were labelled by Morton White as 'atheists for Niebuhr'). Perhaps Epp has prematurely declared Christian realism a case closed as this assessment does not square very well with the continued relevance and popularity Christian realism has enjoyed among the American political elite across the political spectrum, from Jimmy Carter and Madeleine Albright to Condoleezza Rice, Hilary Clinton and, recently, John McCain and Barack Obama whose *Audacity of Hope* is directly inspired by a Niebuhrian ethos.
2. For an account of the complex theological anthropology and soteriology behind the much contested 'rational symbol' of original sin, see Paipais (2019).
3. This is largely the result of a disproportionate focus on the part of International Relations (IR) theorists on Niebuhr's *Moral Man vs Immoral Society* as one of the founding texts of IR realism. This text, with its heavily accentuated dualistic perspective restricting the Christian virtue of love to interpersonal affairs, was later partly repudiated by Niebuhr starting with *Beyond Tragedy* (1937), but this shift was never seriously registered by mainstream receptions of Niebuhr's thought in IR.
4. Patterson (2003) observes that on account of its flexibility, Niebuhr's Christian realism has been claimed by a diverse collection of thinkers (p. 17), 'from conservatives such as Michael Novak and Robert Bease, by some on the political Left such as Robert McAfee Brown [I'd add Andrew Bacevich to the list], and even by advocates of Liberation theology'. Usually, Christian realism is associated with a pragmatic centrism that steers a precarious path between nihilist cynicism and liberal sentimentality. However, one should not conflate it with some tepid, middle-of-the-road centrism (see also Clinton in this volume). Schlesinger (1998) included Christian realism in his definition of the 'vital center' which is not a contest *within* democracy between liberalism and conservatism, but one *between* democracy and totalitarianism (p. x): 'the middle of the road is definitely not the vital center: it is the dead center'. For an argument that Niebuhr and his Christian realist contemporaries, in fact, challenged Schlesinger's Cold War liberal consensus from within and advocated a 'third way', their own

- version of 'conservative socialism' (a mixture of Burkean conservatism, religious ecumenism and social progressivism), see Edwards (2012 and 2015).
5. For an explicit treatment of Niebuhr's political theology, or the way his theological anthropology and theology of history informed his politics, see Paipais (2016)
 6. Yet, the 1961 Berlin crisis awakened him to the real danger and possibility of nuclear war. As Fox (1985) has pointed out, Niebuhr began to advocate a mild form of unilateralism (pp. 277, 278), that is, that America should renounce a first-strike capability, since even a victory won by such means would burden an open, democratic society with oppressive, unendurable guilt. In 1969, he reappraised Barth's neutralism and denounced the kind of anti-communist fanaticism that had thrown the U.S. 'into the most pointless, costly, and bloody war in [its] history' (Niebuhr, 1969: 1663).
 7. For an acclaimed intellectual biography of Butterfield, see Bentley (2011). See also McIntire (2004), Schweizer and Sharp (2007), and Coll (1985).
 8. For the best treatment of Wight's international thought, see Hall (2006).
 9. Indeed, the early Wight (1936) decries the Just War tradition and its 'sorry comforters' (pp. 12–21), like Augustine, for offering a defence of Roman culture tainted by Roman Stoicism. For an argument that Augustine, is not merely a Christian Stoic, but rather describes what true public morality might look like if reformed by Christian virtues, see Williams (2012). Seen in Williams' light, Augustine becomes less than an unreflective Just Warrior and other than a mere apologist for Roman civilisation.
 10. This distinction between Just War as a tradition that seeks to restrain war vs. Just War theory as an approach that seeks to morally justify the use of force in international politics may explain why Niebuhr was a critic of Just War theory while practically sharing many of the central concerns of the tradition, that is, the necessity to combat evil in this world, the tragic view of human nature, and the impurity of human motivations. Niebuhr was opposed to the Catholic, neo-scholastic preoccupation with the formulaic application of natural law-based moral standards for the justification of war, but very much in line with conscience-based revivalist arguments such as Ramsey's (1961) *War and the Christian Conscience*. In that sense, Niebuhr was an early precursor to the criticisms levelled against the revival of Just War theory by scholars such as Rengger (2002) and O'Driscoll (2008), among others, who have problematised the shift from viewing Just War as a historical tradition of pragmatic ethical reflection on the dilemmas of statecraft to treating it as a legalistic doctrine, chiefly concerned with identifying moral criteria (a tick-off list) for the justification of war.

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